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ABSTRACT

If the justification for the existence of an area of study called organizational communication is that communication scholars have something to say to people in organizations, then researchers in the field must be able to take their knowledge into the work-a-day world and make themselves understood to people who are not social scientists. While the normative paradigm is commonly used in the field of organizational communication, it is less than adequate for the purposes of knowing a situation in its own terms with its own meanings. A grounded theoretical approach supplies an alternative to the normative and is compatible with many techniques of research. The normative paradigm and logico-deductive methods depend primarily on causal explanations and do not account for intentions, meanings, and goals. Grounded research, with an orientative toward situational-meanings, is more likely to be able to account for results in the situation that is unique to an organization's goals. (RB)

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Grounded Research: Building Communication Theory for Communication Practice

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There is little need to document the fact that in recent years the field of communication has received increased attention from many publics. Scarcely a day passes without someone describing some problem as a "failure to communicate." With increased attention to communication problems has come an increased demand on communication experts to provide solutions, strategies, and techniques for handling communication difficulties. Thus, the task of the communication scholar has become more difficult. He must not only be able to describe, explain, and predict communication events adequately as a social scientist; he must find ways of making his knowledge understandable and useful to the practitioner. The growth of organizational communication as an area of concern in the field of communication reflects the need for communication research to find applications in practice.

Lofland (1971) characterized modern man as engaged in two kinds of knowing: knowing about things and men and knowing things and men (p. 1). While much contemporary social science has been content to know about men, organizational communication by its nature must know men as well. That is to say, organizational communication experts cannot simply discuss and know about human beings and organizations in the abstract; they must be able to make statements which are understandable and useful to the practitioner in a real organization. Much of the confusion about the field may be symptomatic of the inevitable ambivalence between knowing and knowing about in studying organizational communication.

Usually research in the field has been evaluated and approached in terms of the normative paradigm (see Wilson, 1970). However, for the

scholar who must be concerned with knowing as well as knowing about, it is unreasonable to judge his work solely (if at all) within the terms and constructs of the normative paradigm. The problem with the use of the research strategy (normative) of the natural sciences for the problem of knowing in organizational communication is stated clearly by Atwood (1973).

> For the sciences, Truth is equivalent to laws, which are the universals or regularities which are discovered within the strict empirical data. This data acts as a filter to exclude the spatio-temporal location or specialized circumstances, which would cloud the extensiveness of the law. Experience then becomes reduced to an empirical phenomenon that points to scientific laws that extend beyond it. (p. 1)

The problem is simply that, in order to know rather than know about, the scholar in organizational communication cannot afford to allow the data to stand as a filter between himself and the situation (the organization, etc.) he wishes to know. What then is the alternative?

The Nature of Grounded Theory

The normative paradigm differs from a grounded theoretic approach significantly. The normative paradigm depends on a literal description of phenomena based on common usage or operational concepts which are a priori assumptions for the research (Deetz, 1973, p. 141). The approach makes use of logico-deductive methods. That is, some theoretical stance is assumed at the start of the research. The source of the theory is frequently previous theoretical statements from the literature but the theory may originate in pure speculation, fantasy, common sense, or deduction through a survey of the literature. In any case, the theoretical stance and its conceptual scheme is assumed to exist separately from the phenomena under study. The researcher

must logically deduce specific hypotheses which can be tested and the act of research becomes one of verification. Only following the research act is the question of theory generation addressed. Most frequently a postiori process of logically relating the research results to the conceptual categories of the a priori theoretical scheme occurs. When this is not the case, the researcher is left engaging in some sort of speculation and in either event the generation of theory is separated from the act of research. The end result is some modification or support of the original theoretical scheme without serious alteration of the a priori conceptual scheme. Thus, little theory is generated since the process depends on verification to the exclusion of generation. This approach may be useful if the goal of research is development of a comprehensive, nominal scheme for knowing about. It does not assist the organisational communication scholar who needs to know of as well as to know about.

When I say that the scholar in organisational communication must know, I am suggesting that the justification for the existance of a field of organizational communication lies in the fact that what organizational communication knows about the objects of its study must be such that this knowledge is applicable to real, working organisations and that the knowledge of the field for practitioners in organisations will be understandable, relevant, and useful to them. The organisational communication scholar must know his organisation as well as know about organisations. His concepts must be more than nominally accurate. They must be closely related to the actual situation and provide the best possible understanding of that situation. The normative paradigm

and logico-deductive method only give assurance that the theoretical stance and conceptual scheme will adequately describe the situation. They do not assure the usefulness of the research to those in the situation. Grounded theoretical approaches attempt to overcome that problem.

Grounded theory does not arise separate from the situation studied as in the case of logico-deductive methods. Rather, theory arises in the research act. "Our basic position is that generating grounded theory is a way of arriving at theory suited to its supposed uses." (Glaser and Straus, 1967, p. 3). Grounded theory generation depends on interaction with the situation in the research act and not on conceptualization and theorization prior to the research. The concepts developed in a grounded theory (as well as the relationships understood to exist between concepts) are those which are the most relevant and applicable to the situation in which the research act takes place regardless of a priori assumptions and schemes the researcher may bring with him into the situation. If the conceptual and theoretical scheme is grounded in the situation, then the concepts and research results for the theory should be those which are (or readily can become) highly meaningful and useful to the participants in the situation.

The use of grounded theory leads to new emphasis on areas depreciated by logico-deductive techniques. 1) The situation from which the theory comes is of prime importance. 2) Theory becomes a strategy for handling data. 3) The formulation of clear, significant, and meaningful categories is central. 4) The usefulness and understandability of

the research results (by participants in the situation) rise in importance. 5) The idea of theory as a process (not spatially or temporally static and isolated from the object of study) becomes possible. (Atwood, 1973, p. 2 and Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 3).

Grounded theory accounts for and depends upon the interaction of the researcher with the object of study. Since grounded theory arises within the situation and the research act, it eliminates the split between theory generation and verification. Grounded theory approaches do not ignore verification but allow it to occur in conjunction with the discovery of theory. The criterion of generalizability is not crucial to grounded theory although grounded theories may have considerable generality. More important is the durability of grounded theory. Glaser and Strauss (1967, pp. 2-6) have shown that since grounded theory is closely linked to the situation, it will be less easily replaced by alternate theories in spite of modification.

Differences in the kind of concepts used by either normative or grounded approaches to research is worth consideration. Bruyn (1966, pp. 28-34) characterizes the normative paradigm as depending on concepts which are formal and operational. An alternative to these kinds of concepts are concrete and sensitizing concepts. Operational and concrete concepts are those which serve for interpretation. Operationally the scientist understands that an event has occurred when the set of observable conditions (which when specified form the event's definition) have been shown to have occurred. Interpretation through concrete concepts is quite different.

Concrete concepts are more likely to be used in grounded research.

Concretising concepts are those which are substantive and make use of the symbols which are a significant part of the situation being studied. These are concepts which facilitate interpretation because they call up personal meanings which are shared by all (or virtually all) participants in the situation being studied. For example, if the organization under study were the state prison we might operationally define the concept "convict" to mean any individual placed in the prison after conviction for a felony by a state court and, for the purpose of normative research, this would be sufficient. Presumably the term "inmate" might be defined identically. However, in grounded research the terms convict and inmate would become concrete because those terms are highly, personally meaningful to the participants in the prison situation. In fact, the concept convict is used as a term of respect while the concept inmate is one of depreciation.

Concepts which are formal or sensitising serve for conceptualisation. Formal concepts, most commonly used in the normative paradigm, are similar to Weber's ideal types. The ideal type is,

> . . . a generalized concept which does not describe a concrete case but rather serves as a model from which a number of concrete cases may be compared and analyzed. The ideal type contains no statements of empirical fact as does the operational concept, and while its elements are independently variable, they must necessarily have a fixed relation to one another within the definition of the type. (Bruyn, 1966, p. 32)

In a sense then, formal concepts abstract from rather than relate to the situation under study.

The sensitising concept is one which provides a sense of reference and a general orientation rather than precise definition. It is more

akin to an appropriate illustration than to an operational definition. Through its lack of precise specification the sensitising concept becomes more useful in giving rise to the implications and possibilities of the situation than the formal concept. The use of sensitising concepts allows the researcher to discover various possibilities of interpretation for the situation through his own experience within and outside the particular situation under study. The idea of authority is a formal concept of organisational study. The idea of charismatic leadership is more of a sensitising concept since it not only allows understanding based on personal experience in the situation but it opens up possibilities that the concept of authority (formal) cannot. Surely the communication expert working in an organisation is there to find new possibilities in the situation which were not previously apparent to the participants or why would his advice be sought? His concepts should facilitate that act rather than restrict it through useless precision.

The significance of concretising and sensitising concepts for organisational communication should be apparent. The use of these kinds of concepts necessarily implies knowing of the situation as well as knowing about it. Since these concepts address themselves to situational meanings for the participants as well as the researcher, their use should lead to results and conclusion statements which are meaningful and useful to those in the situation who seek understanding of the nature of communication in their situation and organisation. These concepts allow for an understanding by both participant and researcher which leads beyond the specific conclusions of the study.

Methodological Implications

At this point the reader may have concluded that grounded theoretical research is necessarily qualitative rather than quantitative. That is not the case. Glaser and Strauss (1967, pp. 185-220) provide an extensive discussion of the relationship between grounded theory generation and quantitative techniques. Factor analysis is an example of a quantitative technique which is suited to grounded research approaches. The category structure (i.e. factors) resulting from factor analysis arise from the data itself and are not imposed upon the situation (except as they are imposed by the data collection technique).

Grounded theory generation can take place with the use of any number of research methods, quantitative or qualitative, including: participant observation, field observation, interviewing, surveying, and experimentation. Grounded theory generation does not imply a technique but rather an approach to the use of technique. It suggests that, as the researcher approaches a situation with whatever technique he has selected, he put aside category structures and explanatory modes which are external to the situation and, instead, let the situation speak for itself. However, it is only natural that some techniques are more appropriate to this approach than others (e.g. factor analysis as opposed to analysis of variance). Although the aims of a grounded theory approach are more general and somewhat different, it is not distinctly different from the approaches described by Bruyn (1966), Deetz (1973), Douglas (1970), and Garfinkle (1967).

Although grounded research approaches have been discussed at length by Glaser and Strauss (1967), they did not develop a concise set of criteria for the evaluation of this kind of research. A review of appropriate literature has suggested to me that a series of criterion statements can be developed to guide the researcher in conducting grounded research and to aid the critic in evaluating grounded research on its own merits. I suggest that the following might form the basis for criteria in evaluating the quality of grounded research.

1) The data must be collected and interpreted in the terms of the situation and not in terms of an external or a priori scheme.

2) The relationships and concepts described should be "true" to the situation and arise from it. Data should not be made to fit the theoretical scheme.

3) The concepts used in the study should be primarily sensitising and concretising rather than operational or formal.

4) The researcher must be sufficiently involved with the situation to know it and its meanings. He must know more than about it.

5) Others in a position to observe the situation should be able to agree to the "correctness" of the scheme.

6) The participants in the situation should find the conceptual scheme to be personally meaningful and significant whether or not they agree to the "correctness" of the scheme.

7) The participants in the situation should be able to discover potential uses of the research results that are new to them and are not simply a different description of the same possibilities.

Ultimately the researcher or critic must ask: Is there a better way of conceptualising and theorising for the purposes of finding useful possibilities for action in the situation?

This list of statements is significant in that it omits several usual research criteria. For example, statements 6, 7, and 8 do not require reliability judgements in the typical sense. Participants are not asked to agree with the researcher's judgements but simply to see them as possible. (Douglas, 1970, p. 21) Further, criteria of generalisability based on the results and applied to different times and places are omitted. Since the generation of grounded theory is closely linked to a specific situation, the theoretical scheme may be applicable only to one situation. This is not necessarily damaging. It may well be that the kind of communication processes which are crucial to an organizational problem are unique to that organisation. If that is the case, the communication scholar would be missing the point if he sought only generalisable results.

The discovery of theoretic schemes which are generalisable is not outside the limits of grounded theory generation. Certainly there are some processes, events, and meanings which are similar in all organisations. Glaser and Strauss (1967) have provided a lengthy discussion of the use of multiple comparison groups to determine how much of and to what extent a grounded theory can be generalized. The approach they recommend is not unlike the research done recently by McCroskey on credibility. In fact, there is more than enough published research in organisational communication to provide a basis for comparisons which could lead to theory at various levels of

generality. Of course, some evaluation of how well grounded the research being compared was would be necessary and, undoubtably, the communication scholar seeking to build theory on the basis of comparing previous research studies would be forced to follow Robert Bostrom's advice to "ignore the author's conclusions and find your own by going directly to the data." *

Conclusions

I have characterized the organizational communication scholar as an individual with a role somewhat different than that of other social scientists. If the justification for the existence of an area of study called organizational communication is that communication scholars have something to say to people in organizations, then researchers in the field must be able to take their knowledge into the work-a-day world and make themselves understood to people who are not social scientists. This means that the organizational communication scholar must not only know about organizations he must know of the organization he advises. While the normative paradigm is commonly used in our field, I have shown it to be less than adequate for the purposes of knowing a situation in its own terms with its own meanings. A grounded theoretical approach supplies an alternative to the normative and is compatible with many techniques of research. In a grounded theoretical approach the researcher does not attempt to fit his data into some a priori scheme; rather, he allows the theoretical and

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* Since theory based on comparison of research reports would be forced to use the conceptual schemes (a priori) of the original research authors, theory generated in this manner would probably be poorly grounded. Nevertheless, the possibilities of this approach are interesting and worth consideration.

conceptual scheme to arise within the research act and in the terms of the situation. Grounded research results, thus, should be highly relevant, meaningful, and useful to the participant in the organization. The use of grounded research can help us avoid becoming unable to communicate with those we seek to help. In grounded theory generation the question is not what is an adequate and reliable description but what is the most useful, implication-rich desceiption.

If the grounded theoretical approach is adopted, questions of when and for what purpose is theory to be developed disappear. Theory is viewed as a way of handling data (a major problem that the organizational communication scholar faces). We build theory to be useful for handling the data in a situation and we do it in the research act itself. The split between verification and theory generation is seen as artificial.

The relationship between quantitative and qualitative research is altered when viewed from a grounded theory perspective. Traditionally, qualitative research has been viewed as a preface to quantitative studies. Qualitative research would be used to "rough out" some issues and concepts which quantitative research would then rigorously explore and verify. Within the bounds of grounded research it seems equally logical to use a quantitative technique such as factor analysis to develop grounded concepts to which qualitative research could add situational meanings so that the concepts could be understood and made useful. Further, the use of a grounded theoretical approach places new emphasis on the researcher's involvement with the situation. His objectivity and reliability become secondary when compared to the importance of his acts of interpretation and the situational-oriented understanding he develops.

Redding (1967, p. 6) pointed out that systems of organizational communication must be evaluated and understood in terms of the goals of the organization. The normative paradigm and logico-deductive methods depend primarily on causal explanation and, therefore, have difficulty accounting for intentions, meanings, and goals. Grounded research, on the other hand, with an orientation toward situational-meanings is more likely to be able to account for results in the terms (of the situation) of the organization's goals.

It should be apparent that grounded theory approaches are distinctly different from the normative paradigm. I have presented some criteria upon which grounded research can be evaluated that are appropriate to the particular aims and style of grounded theory generation. It is important that when grounded theoretical research is presented it be recognized as such and judged on the basis of appropriate criteria. If good grounded research is confused with normative research and judged on the basis of normative criteria it will undoubtably be unfairly dismissed as second-class research. Further, it is important for those who have been and will be doing research in a manner similar to grounded theoretical research to explicitly understand what standards their research must meet. If this is not understood the researcher runs the risk of doing neither good normative nor good grounded research. Criteria for performing and evaluating normative research are well-known and understood. Hopefully, this paper will provide a basis for performing and evaluating an important alternative to normative research -- grounded theoretical research -- with some benefit for the field of organizational communication.

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